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The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy

Reviewed by Brent Metz

2004

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2004 The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy, Arturo Arias, ed. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001. *American Ethnologist* 31(2):2006-7.

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Arias, Arturo (ed.)

2001 *The Rigoberta Menchú controversy*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press.

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The Guatemalan army, with training and support from the U.S. military, massacred several tens of thousands of Maya babies, children, adults, and elders. At the height of the repression in the early 1980s, a K'iche' Maya, Rigoberta Menchú, fled Guatemala after several members of her family were killed. As a member of the Committee for Peasant Unity, which was allied with the Guatemalan guerrillas, she went to Paris to raise public awareness. She was invited to tell her personal story to anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray and Guatemalan guerrilla attaché Arturo Taracena, who translated, edited, and re-ordered her disjointed oral narratives. The resulting book, *I... Rigoberta Menchú* (in English), was published in many languages, mobilized global opinion against the atrocities, and became a popular academic text for representing the voice of a subaltern woman. Menchú became a prominent human rights activist and won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1992.

On these points, all seem to agree. Disagreements arise regarding explanations of the Guatemalan resistance and the responsibility for the massacres. Although the guerrillas were not explicitly mentioned in Menchú's account, Stoll argues that it is guerrilla propaganda, interweaving lies and misleading information to over-dramatize Maya oppression to make it seem as if an armed revolt was the only option for "all poor Guatemalans". Conditions were not so desperate, and what social conflict existed was principally between expansive Mayas, not poor Mayas and wealthy Ladinos.

International academics and solidarity activists eagerly swallowed the propaganda, supported human rights groups linked to the guerrillas, and thereby kept the guerrillas on life support long after they were defeated militarily, prolonging army reprisals against

suspected civilian collaborators. The guerrillas survived to negotiate the 1996 Peace Accords, ceding them an undeserved influence in Guatemala's future. Supporters of Menchú and human rights groups reply that Stoll misinterprets Menchú's collective story for an autobiography, points out inaccuracies or inconsistencies that are trivial, exaggerates the solidarity support for the guerrillas and the guerrilla responsibility for the massacres, and selects suspect information that suits his argument.

Did Guatemala have a civil war between two armies, or a genocide in which guerrillas never posed a real threat? Did the violence revolve primarily around Mayas fighting Mayas, and if so, was it rooted in widespread, global forces, or in Maya cultures? *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* debates these points in 33 mostly previously published essays and newspaper editorials by anthropologists, literary critics, historians, geographers, and literary authors. Like other anthropological controversies (Redfield/Lewis, Mead/Friedman, and Chagnon/Tierney), this one reflects the difficulty of separating politics from theory, methodology, and representation. The controversy involves not simply Guatemalan historiography, but explores the limitations of postmodern constructivism, scientific methodology, ethnographic authority, and the authority and value of subaltern personalized accounts, or *testimonios*. Stoll argues that *testimonios*, which most agree are a distinct literary genre characterized by a subaltern's narration of quasi-historical events, are taught by leftist academics as fact, or even sacred texts. A more general issue is whether the role of ethnography is to interpret meaning from multiple voices, or weigh evidence and construct an authoritative history.

Stoll is on trial more than Menchú in this book. In the opening background section, Arias accentuates the brutality of the regime and Pratt strongly argues that Stoll's

work is a conservative project prompted by the culture wars at Stanford. In the next section of editorials and interviews, some helpful information is provided while most pieces are political diatribes for or against Stoll and Menchú. In the final section of well-honed academic essays, most authors challenge Stoll's motives and science. Did he really undertake impartial research, or did he set out to attack multiculturalists by destroying one of their heroes? If his book has distracted attention from the genocide, did he anticipate this? At the end of this section is a rebuttal by Stoll, which is worthy of a section in its own right. Whatever position one takes on the controversy, it is undeniable that Stoll has single-handedly prompted scholars to reflect on their historical narratives and scientific methodologies.

Though various influential articles were excluded from the volume, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* is the most complete compilation on theme yet. For Guatemalanists, the book is essential, and given its treatment of academic politics and ethnographic authority generally, its value goes far beyond Guatemala and even anthropology. For teaching purposes, the book would serve as an excellent compliment to Menchú's *testimonio* and Stoll's book.